

Sonnet XIV

Glossary

nought	nothing
certes	certain
wrought	created, produced
thine	your
evermore	gradually, increasingly
eternity	forever

Summary

This sonnet seems to accept that the lover will not desist. The persona tells the lover that true love cannot be based on the superficial or the changeable. Here the persona pleads with her lover to love her for "love's sake" so she can sure it will be lasting. She rejects some commonly given reasons for love as too changeable. She wants a love that is genuine and based on her essential self.

Discussion

Once more the sonnet is in second person as the lover is directly addressed. The sonnet begins with a grudging acceptance of the lover's affection – "If thou must love me". There is still the implication that the persona cannot really believe the lover is genuine. She then addresses the type of love that has been formed. She insists that the love

*be for nought
Except for love's sake only.*

? implied criticism of conventions of love

She explains what she means when she speaks of what love should not be based on. She does not want it based on appearance or idiosyncrasy ("for her smile . . her look . . her way of speaking gently"). Neither does she want a likeness in thinking that gives comfort ("a trick of thought / That falls in well with mine, and certes brought / A sense of pleasant ease on such a day-") These features are rejected as too ephemeral. She says:

*For these things in themselves, beloved, may
Be changed, or change for thee*

These reasons for love seem rather superficial. Looks obviously change with time but so too do our ideas. We rarely think like any one person all the time. The persona says that love based on these changeable things may well change too: "and love so wrought, / May be unwrought so".

She is also worried he loves her out of pity. It is important you realise Barrett Browning was not well but her poetic brilliance was recognised. Browning had been drawn to her through admiration for her poetry. Her health does seem pitiable but she does not want Browning to love her for this reason. The exclamation mark used shows the force of her emotion. She is adamant he must not love her because he was compassionate or remorseful. She uses the image of herself crying, speaking of the lover "wiping my cheeks dry" yet then states his comfort and attentions might mean she might forget to cry and then lose his pity thereby also his love:

*Neither love me for
Thine own dear pity wiping my tears dry!-
For one might well forget to weep, who bore
Thy comfort long, and lose they love thereby -*

With the image of her crying we are reminded her life before Browning was very sad (remember Sonnet I).

Yet the persona's concession that she might stop crying with his "comfort" reveals her own affection for the lover. Clearly too the entire premise of the poem is based on her not wanting the love to go which also shows her feeling for the lover. It seems she wants the depth of the love she feels to be reciprocated.

This idea is reflected in the final lines of the sonnet which entreat the lover to love her for "love's sake". What she means is hard to put into words, which is of course why she has written the sonnet. The repeated use of dashes mirrors this difficulty as she struggles to elucidate what she means. The notion is like loving her for her essential self and the recognition of the purity of genuine love. She wants the love to grow and endure time. The notion reflects the complexity of Barrett Browning's feelings for her husband-to-be.



Ideas

The power and nature of ideal love

This sonnet marks a change in the persona's attitude toward the lover. There is more of an acceptance of his love although now she wants to check it is of the right sort. The sonnet is underpinned by the notion that love is a powerful emotion that she insists should last for eternity, growing in intensity: "That evermore Thou may'st love on through love's eternity." The fact that she defines eternity by love (love's eternity) reflects the supremacy she attributes to love. So she wants to be sure the love being offered and espoused is of the deeper, genuine love that extends beyond superficial word-play, physical infatuation and an agreeable personality.

In this way the sonnet challenges us to consider what exactly love is. The examples she negates are all common enough sorts of comments made about partners, even today. Yet these examples are seen as superficial, flippant and more infatuation or lust than love. There is a sense of being unable to capture what exactly it is that does make us love another and Barrett Browning seizes upon this. She is certain that love is far more spiritual and soulful than these sort of explanations. Therefore this sonnet shows that love is both powerful and unexplainable.

Hope

In her demands there is a strength in the speaker. The lover has provided her life with hope. The fact that she qualifies the type of love she desires shows she is interested. Her life has changed and there is some acceptance of this and optimism for the future.

Sonnet XIV - Questions

1. Summarise this poem in FIVE points.
2. In your own words, explain what Barrett Browning believes is real love.
3.
 - a. Examine the structure of the sonnet. Summarise its features (ie. rhyme scheme, line stresses, line syllables, idea development)
 - b. How tightly is it organised?
4. Explain how Barrett Browning has used punctuation to help represent her ideas.
5. To what extent is Barrett Browning rejecting flippant stereotype representations of love, especially of a woman's charms?
6. What is the effect of referring to her sad situation by mentioning his pity and her tears?
7. What is the effect of repeating the word "love" so often throughout the poem, especially in the last two lines?